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FM AMEMBASSY KUALA LUMPUR
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INFO RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUCNISL/ISLAMIC COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHAM/AMEMBASSY AMMAN PRIORITY 0101
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING PRIORITY 2559
RUEHRL/AMEMBASSY BERLIN PRIORITY 0210
RUEHEG/AMEMBASSY CAIRO PRIORITY 0077
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA PRIORITY 2728
RUEHDM/AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS PRIORITY 0041
RUEHJA/AMEMBASSY JAKARTA PRIORITY 1778
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 0564
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL PRIORITY 1730
RUEHTV/AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV PRIORITY 0159
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 2615
RUEHJM/AMCONSUL JERUSALEM PRIORITY 0075
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 1090
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 KUALA LUMPUR 000012

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

FOR EAP/MTS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PREL PGOV UN IS MY

SUBJECT: GAZA REACTION: MALAYSIAN PM TAKES CREDIT FOR
FORCING EMERGENCY SESSION OF UNGA

REF: A. KUALA LUMPUR 4 -- UPCOMING BY-ELECTION TEST FOR
UMNO
B. 2008 KUALA LUMPUR 1118 -- GAZA REACTION

Summary and Comment

¶1. (SBU) Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi and Foreign Minister Rais Yatim are touting Malaysia's role in persuading UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon to call the UN General Assembly (UNGA) into an emergency session. Motivated by Malaysia's perception that United Nations Security Council (UNSC) would not likely pass a resolution condemning Israel for its actions in Gaza, the PM reached out to Ban and other influential world leaders to campaign for a special session. Malaysian political leaders and press have ratcheted up their rhetoric towards Israel's invasion of the Gaza strip, openly directing emotional responses toward the U.S. for our alleged one-sided support of Israel. All political parties are attempting to capitalize on the situation to appease their political bases, resulting in a rare moment of political unity between the ruling and opposition parties. Key political figures and organizations are calling for a boycott of American and Israeli products. The Embassy observed another small protest outside our gates on January 5, with a larger one expected on January 9.

¶2. (SBU) Comment. Abdullah and Rais can be expected to trumpet diplomatic initiative, which will fuel continued protests at the Embassy. We do not expect any lasting commercial impact to largely symbolic calls for a boycott of U.S. goods and services. End Summary and Comment.

An Angry PM Reaches Out...and Succeeds

¶3. (U) PM Abdullah called the Israeli offensive "a clear violation of international law", expressing strong disappointment with the UNSC, and the United States in

particular, for failing to agree on a statement condemning Israel. Abdullah said the U.S. "should be using its influence to call for a ceasefire but had not bothered to do so, and instead stood behind Israel's hidden agenda to wipe out Palestine." The Malaysian MFA issued a statement calling Israel's ground assault "a declaration of war against a Muslim country." State-run media continues to keep this event at the forefront, typically including pictures of dead Palestinian children on the front page.

¶4. (U) The initiative began on January 5 when Abdullah contacted Ban and the World Body's President, Miguel d'Escoto Brockmann, to urge them to hold a special session of the UN General Assembly (UNGA) regarding Israel's invasion of the Gaza strip. Abdullah also contacted all the heads of government in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and in the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC). Abdullah said that "only through the special general assembly could the UN negate any improper action of the United States". Foreign Minister Rais Yatim concurrently made a quick, unannounced trip to Jeddah and met with OIC counterparts at a special session of the OIC Executive Committee, whereby the OIC endorsed plans for an emergency UNGA session. FM Rais also reached out to counterparts in other ASEAN nations, receiving letters from Indonesian Foreign Minister Hassan Wirajuda and ASEAN Secretary General Surin Pitsuwan supporting the Malaysian initiative.

¶5. (SBU) Abdullah and Rais appear to have attained their objective: on January 8, FM Rais announced during a speech to foreign diplomats that Ban decided to call an emergency

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session of UNGA to discuss the Gaza situation and to demand an immediate cease fire. Rais read the text of a letter from Ban, which stated that he was calling the session "in response to the formal requests by the Prime Minister of Malaysia and the President of Brazil." Rais commented that "the session is scheduled for January 8, which is today." (Note: Malaysia is 13 hours ahead of EST. Poloff was in attendance of the speech, and notes that Rais received a standing ovation after reading Ban's letter from an audience comprising of MFA officials and high-ranking members of the diplomatic community. End Note.) Abdullah, also in attendance, later told reporters that the international community "has a moral duty" to save the Palestinian people. He went on to say that "On the issue of morality, Israel has to be sanctioned".

Other Political Fallout Over Gaza

¶6. (SBU) The PM has called for the Malaysian Parliament to hold a special session on January 12 to discuss "Israel's cruelty against Palestine." Contacts from both political coalitions told Poloff that there will be a lot of criticism toward the U.S. The Utusan Malaysia, the UMNO party newspaper, called for the MPs to take harsher measures beyond condemnation toward the U.S. and Israel at the special session. Among many (wildly impractical) suggestions by the newspaper were to expel US diplomats in Malaysia and close the U.S. Embassy in Kuala Lumpur; stop Malaysian students from studying in the U.S.; end FTA talks, withdraw all investments from the U.S.; and dissolve the UN and replace it with another body that excluded the U.S. and Israel.

¶7. (SBU) Domestic political considerations are driving Malaysian authorities, although the Prime Minister is no doubt sincere and personally committed to his proposed course of action. Both candidates in next week's by-election (ref A), along with DPM Najib Razak and opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim, have used the Gaza situation as a rallying cry for the masses. Anwar told supporters at a campaign rally "while Israel is punishing the Palestinian people for choosing Hamas, it is no different from UMNO punishing Malaysians for

choosing the Pakatan Rakyat." PAS President Abdul Hadi Awang and DAP Secretary-General Lim Guan Eng have also been outspoken in their criticism of Israel, calling for a rare unified statement from both political coalitions to demonstrate Malaysia's unity on this issue. FM Rais, himself running for one of three UMNO VP seats in March, also proposed that the government should organize a "mammoth rally" to condemn Israel's action in Palestine as a "crime against humanity."

Economic Fallout Over Gaza

¶18. (U) On January 5, the Malaysian Muslim Consumers' Association, a relatively unknown organization advocating Halal products and other Muslim consumer interests, called for a boycott of "Israeli and US products and services", posting graphic photos of Palestinian dead and wounded on its website www.muslimconsumer.org.my. The banner at the top of the Malay-language site portrayed three trash cans labeled "Coca-Cola", "Colgate", and "Starbucks" with the word "boycott" in flashing red letters. The association identified 108 brands for the boycott, including some that were neither Israeli nor American. Popular brands such as Pizza Hut and Domino's were missing from the list, but Finnish Nokia, Swiss Nestle, and a number of other non-US companies were included.

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¶19. (U) On January 6, former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad called for a boycott of U.S. products and of the US dollar, saying that if people stop accepting the currency the US would not be able to trade and would become very poor, resulting in a "stop (to) the production of more and more weapons in order to kill people." He claimed that money spent on American goods was spent in the "invention, production, and manufacturing of weapons."

¶10. (U) Mahathir also urged people to stop drinking Coca-Cola. Since his comments on January 6, the Association of Muslim Restaurant operators, an association representing over 2600 Muslim restaurants in Malaysia, has agreed to remove Coca-Cola from their menus effective January 9. Other products are being named as targets for a boycott as well, including McDonald's and Maybelline. On January 7, the editor of a local newspaper urged NGOs to pressure the government to stop doing business with US banks (Citibank and Bank of America both have a presence in Malaysia).

¶11. (SBU) Comment: While the wider boycott of US products appears to be poorly planed and too broad to be effective, the boycott of Coca-Cola in Muslim restaurants may prove to be more effective at least in symbolic and publicity value. While the economic consequences may not be significant, the absence of Coca-Cola will be noticed, and the boycott could also spread to other retail outlets. End Comment.

The Protests Continue

¶12. (SBU) A small delegation from Gerakan Belia 4B Malaysia gathered in front of the Embassy on January 5 to protest Israel's attack on Gaza. Press filmed the event as they handed over a protest letter, and then held a press conference on the street. RSO reports that there were only 35 protesters and that the entire event lasted 15 minutes. Embassy contacts told Poloff that several youth groups will converge at the Embassy on January 9 to protest US support for Israel, and claim credibly that several thousand people will attend.

KEITH